



The very best of British beef - in Surrey!

It was in the mid-1930s when Percy Stovold - much against his father's advice - quietly brought some Aberdeen Angus beef cattle down from Scotland to his farm in Milford, Surrey.

"For two years he kept the animals in a barn without letting anyone know, because my great grandfather, Ernest, told him they wouldn't survive and that they would break him financially," said Angus Stovold.

In fact, the cattle adapted well to their new home in the south and were registered as a herd in 1936. Two years later they won a string of prizes at various national cattle shows.

Angus, who owns and runs 600-acre Lydling Farm in Shackleford, near Godalming, is now building on the foundations laid by his grandfather and taking his prized 700-strong herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle to even greater heights.

"When I took over Lydling Farm from my father in 1990, I felt we weren't making the most of what was a really good product. The meat went to butchers without being branded, so no-one knew its provenance."

So Angus, whose family has lived in Surrey since at least the 1340s, set about reorganising his cattle-rearing and marketing operations so that he could sell top quality branded beef 52 weeks a year through selected local butchers.

Thirteen years on, he is now the proud owner of what is the biggest Aberdeen Angus herd in England and probably the third biggest such herd in the UK.

**Ron Toft visits Lydling Farm
at Shackleford, near
Godalming, where Angus
Stovold has built up the
biggest Aberdeen Angus
herd in England**

Photos: Ron Toft



Angus Stovold's family has lived in Surrey since the 1340s

"Surrey is renowned for many things, but not beef cattle," said Angus, who is Chairman of the Surrey branch of the National Farmers' Union (NFU), "yet we have one of the premier Aberdeen Angus herds in the whole country. Two years ago we were judged to have the best suckler herd in the UK - the first time that anyone outside Scotland had been awarded that accolade."

During my visit to Lydling Farm, Angus constantly extolled the virtues of his jet black Aberdeen Angus cattle. But what is it, exactly, that makes this breed, and the meat from it, so special?

"They are very hardy cattle with a lovely nature, they are excellent grazing animals, they almost always calve themselves and they produce an outstanding dense, marbled meat."

Angus' cattle stay outside all year round, even during the harshest conditions. During winter, they are fed maize, wheat and peas. In summer, they eat grass, weeds and virtually anything else they come across.

"They are very good grazers. They will even eat nettles. It's this varied diet which seems to impart a better flavour to their meat."

When it comes to calving, Lydling Farm's cattle are left very much to their own devices. "They just do what comes naturally and very rarely need any help from me. Only occasionally do we have to take a pregnant cow inside and give it a helping hand. I've got some 17-year-old cows now on their 15th

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calif," continued Angus, who is a Council Member of the Aberdeen Angus Society.

Around 90% of Angus' cows are sold to other farmers as breeding stock, along with some bulls. The rest are slaughtered for meat. "We use a small family abattoir in Farnborough to prepare our meat, which is then sold not only through selected butchers' shops but increasingly at farmers' markets."

Lydling Farm is covered mainly by "a very hungry sandy loam." Despite that, little artificial fertiliser is used to improve the soil. "The amount of dung generated by our cattle, and by the 4,000 or so pigs owned by a tenant farmer, means we don't have to add much at all to the soil. As a result, we get plenty of beetles and other insects which, in turn, attract bats. It's natural, sustainable farming."

The only crops grown at Lydling are maize, wheat and peas, all of which are used as animal fodder.

Angus believes that the enlargement of the EU will result in the UK being flooded with still greater quantities of cheap, imported meat. "We may not be able to beat foreign producers on price, but we can certainly beat them on quality. That's what UK farmers now have to do to survive - concentrate on offering the public quality rather than quantity. That's certainly what I and my tenant pig farmer are doing. I produce quality beef and he produces quality pork."

"It takes a long time to get Aberdeen Angus cattle ready for the table. But we don't push anything. As a result, the meat is superb."

Angus doesn't think he improves the taste and texture of his beef, but he certainly wants to try and improve his breeding stock.

"That's something you can't do overnight. I am always looking for new bulls and I will go wherever I have to in order to get them. I would even go abroad if that was necessary. But I've been lucky so far in that I've always been able to find what I want in this country."

"When you buy a new bull, you don't realise the potential of that purchase for three years. It's a long process. I guess we are somewhere in the 'Top 10' of UK Aberdeen Angus herds and my aim is to get right to the top."

Angus believes in farming with, rather than against, nature. As a result, Lydling is a haven for wildlife - everything from bats and beetles to flocks of wintering golden plovers, skylarks and, increasingly, uncommon tree sparrows.

"Farming occupies 80% of the countryside, but you can't just have pockets of wildlife. You've got to look after the land so that all of it is suitable for wildlife. Before I do anything here at Lydling, I consider what impact it will have on the farm's biodiversity and ecology. Everything I do must have a positive effect on the flora and fauna."

Angus uses artificial fertilisers only sparingly and never near field boundaries. Ragwort

and other pernicious weeds are controlled not by spraying but by using a device which applies tiny amounts of a chemical compound to the tops of the plants and not on the soil.

"The ground here is particularly weedy, but we have to strike a balance between weed control and biodiversity. It would be quick, easy and cheap to spray my weeds, but I am not prepared to do that, because you don't know where the chemicals will end up."

Angus doesn't mind pockets of thistles because they provide much-needed food for finches and other birds during the winter.

After driving me to a hilltop overlooking his farm and the Shackle valley, he pointed to the landscape in front of us and remarked: "Everything looks beautiful, natural and unmanaged."

Beautiful and natural it certainly is, but unmanaged it certainly is not.

"On a working farm, everything, including nature, has to be managed - but managed for the benefit of wildlife. Lydling used to be a very tidy farm with all its hedges manicured."

You can run a successful agricultural enterprise and still have a wildlife-rich environment. But it comes at a price.

Now I've let the appearance go to a certain extent, and that's good for wildlife.

"You can come up here on a winter's day and see a mixed flock of 400 finches feeding, including linnets and greenfinches. I want to keep these birds on my land and also see their numbers increase."

In a pond adjacent to the main Shackleford village road lies a fallen dead tree. "Many people told me I should remove it because it spoils the appearance of the area. My policy, however, is to leave dead trees exactly where they fall, because they provide food and shelter for all manner of living things."

The pond contains freshwater mussels and also attracts exotic-looking mandarin ducks and the occasional kingfisher. "Removing rubbish from the roadside hedge is one of the biggest management tasks. I also pollard the willows from time to time."

Nearby is a large, tree-fringed lake which boasts hundreds of pipistrelle and Daubenton's bats. "An expert who visited the farm found 500 pipistrelles of two types in pre-war numbers, as well as Daubenton's bats. Later, the BBC came here to film the Daubenton's feeding over the water."

Adjoining the lake is a wetland area dotted with marsh marigolds. "This is managed



Angus Stovold is planting hedgerows at Lydling Farm both for the benefit of wildlife and for practical farming purposes

under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, which means I don't fertilise it, spray it, roll it or harrow it. But I do regularly remove young trees. If I didn't, the area would turn into scrub and eventually dry out."

Angus, who is also Chairman of the Surrey and Hampshire FWAG (Farm and Wildlife Advisory Group), is gradually increasing the number of hedgerows on his farm - not just for wildlife but also for practical agricultural purposes.

"Although I am keen to retain the generally open nature of the farm, I am slowly putting in hedges where I think they will enhance wildlife and where they will also be of farming benefit, such as separating two fields so that I can keep a bull in each of them."

He concluded with this comment: "Lydling Farm is testimony to the fact that you can run a successful agricultural enterprise and still have a wildlife-rich environment. But it comes at a price. If the public wants a biologically diverse and ecologically healthy countryside, and I believe it does, then it must support farmers by buying our products and not cheap foreign imports."

WHERE TO BUY

Sales outlets for Lydling Farm Aberdeen Angus beef include:

- ☐ Farmers' Markets throughout Surrey
- ☐ Online from the website at www.aberdeenangus.co.uk
- ☐ C.H. Wakeling Ltd Family Butchers, 41 Farncombe Street, Godalming (0800 975 6314)
- ☐ Secretts Farm Shop, Chapel Lane, Milford (01483 520540)